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ABSTRACT

This report describes the attitudes of 891 administrators from rural, urban and suburban school districts about special education. The study focused on the priority of nine variables identified in the literature as being common among special education students who have dropped out of school. These variables included: (1) retention in grade; (2) no hope of graduating; (3) frustration with school; (4) undiagnosed learning disabilities; (5) emotional problems; (6) being too different from peer group; (7) chronic medical problems; (8) lack of noncollege-bound track; and (9) being in special classes. Results indicate that lack of hope for graduating was the highest priority cause. Emotional problems and frustration were also deemed as priorities. Medical problems, lack of noncollege-bound track, untreated learning disabilities, being in special classes, and being too different from the peer group were perceived as low priorities. Compared to suburban and rural administrators, urban administrators were more likely to hold higher priorities for the contributing variables of medical problems, lack of hope for graduation, and being too old for peer groups. The literature indicates that special education students drop out of school at an unacceptable rate nationally. One hope to reverse this trend is for administrators to either change their priorities or remediate the causes of dropping out. Studies are needed to focus on special education students who are typically not the focus of dropout prevention efforts. Tables illustrating the statistical analyses of questionnaire results are included. (34 references) (LP)

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Administrator's Perceptions of Special Education Dropouts: A Comparision of Priorities by School Location

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ADMINISTRATOR'S PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION DROPOUTS: A Comparison of Priorities by School Location

RC 018502

Abstract

Administrators (N=891) in rural, urban and suburban districts were asked the relative priority they assigned to causes of dropping out of school. Results indicate that the priorities for administrators were not those needed to keep special education students in school. Specifically, urban administrators were more likely to hold higher priorities for the special education contributing variables of medical problems, no hope for graduation and being too old for peer groups, than were rural or suburban administrators. Data were interpreted as being supportive of other studies which indicate special education students are typically not the focus of dropout prevention efforts.

Administrator's Perceptions of Special Education Dropouts: A Comparison of Priorities by School Location

Special education students are typically ignored when causes of dropping out of school are examined, yet a great number of students who are in special education are among the ranks of those who drop out of school (Cobb & Crump, 1984; Edgar, 1987; Fardig, Algozzine, Schwartz, Hensel & Westling, 1985; Hess & Lauber, 1985; Hoffman, Sheldon, Minskoff, Sautter, Steidle, Baker, Bailey & Echols, 1987; New York City Board of Education, 1985). In fact, Education of the Handicapped (1989) noted that despite the fact that 44% of all special education students drop out of school, dropout prevention programs rarely benefit children in special education.

Rural areas are particularly vulnerable to special education dropouts (Helge, 1989). Many services for special students taken for granted in urban areas are not available or are available only with extreme difficulty in rural areas. Because services are lacking, special students are increasingly at-risk for dropping out.

Pallas (1987) asserts that urban students drop out at a higher rate than their rural or suburban peers. In addition, having a disability is seen as making graduation more difficult (Viadero, 1989). Students with mild handicaps may believe they can more easily compete in a non-academic setting. This leads to the choice of getting a job in the community and no longer viewing school as a viable alternative (Lichtenstein & Zantal-Weiner, 1988).

Recognizing that federal law mandates specialized educational services for these students and that almost half of special education students drop out of school, to what extent are public schools and administrators addressing this issue?

The purpose of this article is two-fold. The first is to provide a description of the variables identified in the literature relating to special education students dropping out of school. The second is to report the national priorities for these variables as reported by principals and superintendents in public education.

Causes of Dropping Out

Each year, a Phi Delta Kappa study is conducted concerning problems in the schools of America. The 1989 report noted that three-fourths of the principals surveyed said graduation requirements had increased in their districts. In addition, seven out of ten principals reported the practice of regularly retaining students. Even though only 25% of the respondents thought that retention was effective, 70% used retention in their schools (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989).

Retention in grade. Retention is thought to be a cause for some special students dropping out. Being retained in grade is a blow to academic self-esteem and those who have been retained are four times as likely to dropout as those who have not been retained (Widmann & Hoisden, 1988). A direct result of being retained is being over age for grade level and Hahn (1987) reports 41% of the dropouts in Los Angeles cited being over age as their reason for dropping out. This factor links with another predictor of dropping out, academic weakness, the traditional difficulty special education students have with basic skills.

This factor of older student age and its relationship to dropping out of school have been recognized by many researchers in the field including Beck and Muia (1982), Bernoff (1981), Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1986), Hess (1987), Hess and Lauber (1985) and Stephenson (1985).

No hope of graduating. In a recent study of rural special education teachers and administrators, Bull, Salyer and Montgomery (1990) found that

more than 75% of the respondents thought that those who were without hope of graduating were at-risk for dropping out. This variable is also supported by Widmann and Hoisden (1988) across the broad spectrum of district types.

Frustration with school. Special education students who drop out, primarily those with learning disabilities, report schooling experiences typified by frustration and academic failure (Levin, Zigmond & Birch, 1985). This leads them to drop out (Barr & Knowles, 1986). Learning disabled students in programs which lead to academic success and challenge, rather than frustration, are more likely to maintain their status in school. Bull, Salyer and Montgomery (1990) found that eliminating frustration was one of the highest priorities in trying to deal with the dropout problem in rural locales.

One reason for the frustration of students is the lack of an appropriate educational program. Many special education students can perform if provided with an interesting and appropriate educational diet. The variety needed can be found in vocational/technical curricular offerings. Oftentimes, however, schools only offer an academic curriculum because of limited programming, small size and distance from central vocational/technical schools. As a result, many special education students who could graduate if offered a vocational curriculum are sentenced to an academic curriculum which has little perceived relevance to their interests or capabilities.

In a survey of rural special educators, Bull, Salyer and Montgomery (1990) found that 60% of the respondents believed that the addition of a strong vocational track should be a high priority in addressing the dropout problem. The lack of non-college or vocational tracks has been shown to doom many students to failure, thus increasing the dropout rate (Bishop, 1988; Reynolds, 1986; Weber & Sechler, 1988).

Undiagnosed learning disabilities. Not all students who should be in special education are so placed. This, too, leads to frustration and to dropping out. Hahn (1987) reports that undiagnosed learning disabilities are linked to students dropping out of school. He points to estimates of the percentage of learning disabled students in the population which range from 5 to 10% for secondary students; yet less than 3% of this group are typically diagnosed by the schools. Slow learners or handicapped students whose problems are not dealt with face frustration and are top candidates for dropping out (Bull & Garrett, 1989). A recent study with rural special educators supports this reality, with 70% citing undiagnosed learning disabilities as a significant cause for students dropping out of school (Bull, Salyer & Montgomery, 1990).

Emotional problems. Hahn (1989) reports emotional problems as an additional cause of students dropping out of school. Typically schools underserve those with emotional problems due to lack of trained teachers or counselors. Helge (1990) asserts that students with serious emotional overlays are generally unable to focus on learning and therefore are at significant risk for aging out or dropping out of school.

The U.S. Department of Education (1987) reported that 29% of students with emotional disturbance problems were dropouts (Ninth Annual Report to Congress). This idea that special education students with emotional disturbances are more likely to be at risk of dropping out is supported by others (Edgar, 1987; Bruininks, Thurlow, Lewis & Larson, 1988; Bull, Salyer & Montgomery, 1990).

Being too different from peer group. Bull and Garrett (1989) suggest that when students are too different from their peer groups that dropping out is a very viable option. Special education students with physical handicaps

see themselves as being too different from their peer groups and therefore they do not bond to the educational system and ultimately drop out. Specifically, Owings and Stocking (1986) report that 23% of orthopedically handicapped students drop out.

Chronic medical problems. Finally, there are children whose medical problems make it exceedingly difficult for them to complete high school. Some of these children are served in special education under the rubric of the physically handicapped. Others receive homebound services for chronic illness which usually preclude graduation with the peer group. In either case, the student with chronic medical problems is less likely to complete school than his/her less medically involved peers. This is particularly true in rural areas where service availability is typically restricted (Helge, 1990).

Method

Instrumentation

The instrument for this study was created by Bull, Salyer and Montgomery (1990). Each of the 42 variables or items on the instrument represented a possible cause for dropping out, withdrawing, grade retention, or leaving early that was reported in the educational/psychological literature. From this larger group of variables, nine were identified as being more closely aligned with special education clientele than with regular children and youth. They included specifically the following: frustration with school, medical problems, emotional problems, no hope of graduation, lack of non-college bound track, being in special classes, being too old for peer group, being too different from peer group, and undiagnosed learning disabilities.

When necessary or for clarity, the item was followed with a parenthetical explanation. For example, Item 2 read: Frustration (for slow or unserved, handicapped for whom education is too hard, instruction undifferentiated, teachers inflexible).

Participants responded to each item using a Likert-like five option scale ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). The question stem asked to what extent they agreed that the item represented a national priority.

Subjects

The subjects were randomly selected principals (initial sample, N=650) and superintendents (N = 650) drawn from Patterson's American Education (Moody, 1989). Thirteen hundred questionnaires were distributed. To improve the return rate, two mail follow-ups were conducted. A total of 933 questionnaires were returned and of these 891 were usable which yielded a return rate of 71.8%.

The sample contained 752 males and 119 females. They averaged 10.7 years in administration and 12.3 years in teaching. In terms of education, 417 held BA/BS Degrees, 191 held MA/MS/MAT Degrees and 245 held Specialist or Ph.D./Ed.D Degrees. In terms of location, 398 were from rural schools, 189 from urban schools and 241 from suburban schools. Administrators reported their school socio-economic status as 19 upper class, 583 middle class and 121 lower class.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using SYSTAT (Wilkinson, 1987) and SPSS-X (1983) with default options, unless otherwise indicated.

Results

The nine special education items related to special education were initially subjected to chi-square analyses. The five-point Likert-like responses were collapsed into a three point scale for ease of reporting by combining "strongly agree" and "agree" and "strongly disagree" and "disagree"

categories. This combination yielded an expected value for the chi-squares of 40%, 20% and 40%. The chi-square analyses, all significant at $P < .001$, are reported in Table 1.

When the data are examined, it is clear that administrators appear to be very clear on their priorities. High priority items are no hope of graduation and emotional problems. Median level priorities include frustration, being too old for peer group and untreated learning disability. Causal variables that are perceived as low priorities are medical problems, lack of non-college bound track, untreated learning disabilities, being in special classes and being too different from the peer group. These latter two are low priority mainly due to the uncertainty of the respondents.

To examine the differences by location (rural, urban and suburban), one-way analyses of variance were conducted on each of the 9 items. The one-way ANOVA's yielded three significant differences (with significant Tukey post hocs):

1) medical problems - Urban > Suburban;
2) No hope for graduation - Urban > Rural; and
3) Being too old for peer group - Urban > Suburban and Urban > Rural.

For each of these comparisons, urban administrators hold these items as a higher priority than do their identified counterparts. Table 2 summarizes these findings.

Discussion

The data indicate that administrators have a clear set of priorities when it comes to dealing with special education related causal variables for dropping out. They believe that no hope of graduating is the highest priority cause. We might speculate that this is because it reduces their control over the students. If a student has no hope, then what can an administrator do to coerce or entice the student into school conforming behaviors. The same might be inferred by the ranking of emotional problems as a priority. Students with emotional problems are not typically treatable and teachers are likely to send them to administrators; and administration may not be able to deal with them any better than the teachers.

Summarizing the results for the third priority, frustration, there is less agreement among respondents. It is still clear that two-thirds of the respondent see this as an area that should be worked on. It is feasible to believe that dealing with frustration is something that administrators could work on if they so desired. It seems reasonable to assume that appropriate programming and curriculum diversification are possible in any district if deemed a high priority. And appropriate programming and curriculum diversification are possible solutions to the frustration experienced by special education students.

It is interesting that the remaining items are seen as priorities by less than fifty percent of the administrators. This reinforces the results of other studies which show that the focus of dropout remediation is not on the special needs of special education students and may well be of no benefit to these individuals.

When we examine the data by location, they show that urban administrators hold higher priorities than rural and suburban administrators on causes related to special education dropouts. This may be due to a higher prevalence of special education students in urban schools. The higher prevalence rate is possibly due to better identification practices or it may be that rural administrators are more conservative. A conservative assumption is that rural administrators better control their schools and have fewer dropouts as a result. Another less appealing yet plausible assumption may be

that rural administrators lack interest in retaining expensive special education students in their rural elementary and secondary schools.

The literature clearly indicates that special education students drop out of school at an unacceptable rate nationally. Clearly, a goal for those of us in the field of special education who be to reduce the dropout rates of our students. From these data, it would seem likely that special education students will be over represented in the population of dropouts. However, one hope to reverse this trend is for administrators to change their priorities or remediate the causes of dropping out.

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Table 1

Chi-Square Analyses of responses to the question: Should this cause of dropping out be a national priority?

Item	% Agreement	Cases		N	Chi-Square*
Expected value		(40)	(20)	(40)	
Frustration	68.7	587	70	197	855	240.00
Medical problems	15.5	132	141	580	853	300.53
Emotional problems	82.1	705	66	88	859	635.42
No hope of graduation	86.9	740	33	79	852	779.51
Lack of non-college bound track	32.5	275	71	501	847	146.83
Being in special classes	32.4	274	203	369	846	21.78
Being too old for peer group	43.1	366	124	359	849	15.51
Being too different from peer group	25.1	213	202	431	847	78.62
Undiagnosed learning disabilities	42.1	356	92	398	846	46.64

* = All chi-squares significant at .001

Table 2

Significant Analyses of Variance Comparisons by Location* of Responses to the Question: Should this possible cause of dropping out be a national priority?

Item	U/S	U/R	S/U	S/R	R/U	R/S**
Medical Problems		X				
No hope for graduation		X				
Being too old for peer group	X	X				

* Significant comparisons also had significant Tukey post hocs.

** U/S = Urban > Suburban
U/R = Urban > Rural
S/U = Suburban > Urban
S/R = Suburban > Rural
R/U = Rural > Urban
R/S = Rural > Suburban